

An Exegetical Note on Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 351E*

abstract: In this article, I deal with a short but complex sentence at the end of the first chapter of Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris*. Plutarch there says that "the happiness of even the eternal life, which God has obtained as his portion, consists in the fact that the things that come to be do not, through knowledge, fail in advance" (351E). This obscure phrase implies, so I argue, that Plutarch's providential God has a knowledge of particular contingencies and that this knowledge indeed contributes to his eternal blessedness without affecting His essence.

key words: Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, divine knowledge, divine blessedness.

At the beginning of his famous proem to *Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch underlines the great importance of our pursuit of the truth about the gods. This pursuit is even regarded as a longing for divinity (351E: *θείότητος ὄρεξις*¹), for the very blessedness of the god does not consist in material wealth or power but in knowledge and intelligence (351D). After a brief allusion to Homer (*Il.* 13, 354-355), Plutarch concludes the chapter with the following idea²:

οἶμαι δὲ καὶ τῆς αἰωνίου ζωῆς, ἣν ὁ θεὸς εἴληχεν, εὐδαιμον εἶναι τὸ τῇ γνώσει μὴ προαπολείπειν τὰ γιγνόμενα· τοῦ δὲ γινώσκειν τὰ ὄντα καὶ φρονεῖν ἀφαιρεθέντος, οὐ βίον ἀλλὰ χρόνον εἶναι τὴν ἀθανασίαν (351E).

τό *om.* Laur. 80.5; *προαπολείπειν* Bernardakis; *προαπολιπεῖν* manuscripts; τὰ *γινόμενα* manuscripts; τὰ *γινωσκόμενα* Wytttenbach; τῶν *γινόμενων* Reiske.

This is a very important but also a particularly difficult sentence. The problem mainly concerns the precise meaning of the obscure phrase *τὸ τῇ γνώσει μὴ προαπολείπειν τὰ γιγνόμενα*, which has, as far as I know, as yet never been understood correctly. Basically three alternative interpretations have been proposed thus far.

1) The first interpretation (Meunier, Hopfner, Cavalli) connects the happiness of the eternal life with its knowledge of everything that exists³. This interpretation has important advantages from a philosophical point of view, in that it enables to situate the god firmly on his own intelligible realm. And that is indeed what we could expect in Plutarch's Platonic perspective. Elsewhere in *Isis and Osiris*, we read that Osiris is "far removed from the earth, undefiled, unpolluted and pure from any being that is subjected to decay and death" (382F) and that Zeus' "mind and reason are of themselves

* I am much indebted to the two anonymous referees of the journal, who pointed to some difficulties of my argument in an earlier draft of this article and encouraged me to clarify my view. They should not be held responsible for remaining shortcomings.

¹ An obvious allusion to the traditional end of *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ*, which Plutarch fully endorsed; see on this esp. Becchi 1996, where much relevant material from both Plutarch and other Platonists is conveniently listed. A detailed analysis of the introduction to *Isis and Osiris* can be found in Roskam 2014.

² I follow the most recent edition of the treatise, by Bernardakis - Ingenkamp 2009.

³ Meunier 1924, p. 22: "le bonheur de l'existence éternelle, qui est l'apanage de Dieu, consiste en ceci, à savoir que rien de tout ce qui est ne peut échapper à sa connaissance"; Hopfner 1941, p. 3: "Ich glaube nämlich, daß die Seeligkeit des ewigen Lebens, dessen Gott teilhaftig ward, nur darin besteht, daß es an Erkenntnis nicht hinter all dem zurückbleibt, was (wahrhaft) existiert"; Cavalli 1985, p. 57: "ancora nel fatto che la conoscenza divina possiede per sempre la realtà degli avvenimenti, consiste l'eccellenza di quella vita eterna che al dio appartiene".

fixed amid the unseen and unperceived” (376C). The most important problem with this interpretation, however, which also distinguishes it from the others, is that it interprets τὰ γιγνόμενα as “everything that (really) exists” (“was (wahrhaft) existiert” [Hopfner] or “la realtà degli avvenimenti” [Cavalli]). Thus, it actually equates τὰ γιγνόμενα with the following τὰ ὄντα. Such a blurring of ontological levels is quite unlikely for a Platonist like Plutarch and moreover, the interpretation thus seems to ignore the connection between the two parts of the sentence: the particle δέ (instead of γάρ) in fact shows that the second part is *not* meant as a further explanation but rather *introduces something new*. Opsomer ventured an interesting attempt to both have the cake of this interpretation and eat it, that is, to carefully maintain the distinction between the levels of τὰ γιγνόμενα and τὰ ὄντα while at the same time keeping God in the intelligible realm. He argues that God’s knowledge concerns first of all intelligible being, and then also the world to the extent that the latter participates in intelligibility⁴. This is a clever suggestion that succeeds in safeguarding Plutarch’s philosophical consistency, but it is difficult of course to read all this in the simple concept of τὰ γιγνόμενα.

2) The second alternative (Babbitt, Froidefond) connects the happiness of the eternal life with God’s prescience of events⁵. This interpretation first of all raises some grammatical problems, notably concerning the dative τῇ γνώσει. Among the translations listed in note 5, those of Babbitt, Cilento, Valgiglio, Pordomingo Pardo and García Valdés require a genitive (which is the usual complement of προαπολείπειν; cf. *LSJ* ad loc.), that of Griffiths an accusative (as the subject of προαπολείπειν). Furthermore, the precise meaning of the verb προαπολείπειν (left untranslated by Froidefond) is not “escape” but “leave before” or “fail before”. In this light, all these translations more or less ignore the precise semantic value of the verb προαπολείπειν and its combination in this passage with a dative instead of a genitive. An obvious advantage of this interpretation, as compared to the first alternative, is that it does at least justice to the philosophical sense of τὰ γιγνόμενα, yet it also causes a new philosophical problem. God’s absolute prescience of events most likely implies the loss of human free will⁶, and this is utterly unacceptable for Plutarch.

⁴ Opsomer 1997, p. 350: “on peut, me semble-t-il, avancer l’hypothèse que la science divine se rapporte d’abord à l’être intelligible, et secondairement au monde *dans la mesure où celui-ci participe à l’intelligibilité*” (his italics).

⁵ Babbitt 1936, p. 9: “a source of happiness in the eternal life, which is the lot of God, is that events which come to pass do not escape His prescience”; Froidefond 1988, p. 178: “la béatitude de la vie éternelle, privilège de la divinité, consiste dans la prescience de ce qui va être”. We may also compare the following translations, which are better in that they are more neutral, but which involve basically the same grammatical problems as those of Babbitt and Froidefond: Cilento 1962, p. 9: “l’essenza della beatitudine, nella vita eterna che Dio ebbe in sorte, consiste nel fatto che gli avvenimenti non possono sfuggire alla sua conoscenza”; Griffiths 1970, p. 119: “the happiness which marks even the eternal life which God enjoys consists in the fact that his knowledge does not lag behind events”; Valgiglio 1988, p. 15: “La sua felicità consiste [...] nel fatto che gli avvenimenti non possono sfuggire alla sua conoscenza”; Pordomingo Pardo 1995, p. 62: “la dicha de la vida eterna, que es la suerte de la divinidad, radica en que los acontecimientos no escapan a du conocimiento”; García Valdés 1995, p. 57: “la felicidad de la vida eterna, que es lote del dios, consiste en que los acontecimientos no escapan a su conocimiento”.

⁶ Cf. Opsomer 1997, p. 250.

3) The third interpretation (Bernard) is, to my mind, the best one: God's happiness lies in the fact that he, in his knowledge, does not in advance leave behind the things that come to be⁷. This alternative differs from the first interpretation in that it correctly interprets τὰ γιγνόμενα as things that come to be (rather than things that really are), and improves on the second interpretation by avoiding the notion of prescience and by staying quite close to the Greek text. Yet two minor problems may be raised. First, the dative τῇ γνώσει ("in der Erkenntnis") should in all likelihood rather be understood as causal, as appears from a perfect parallel in *Against the Stoics on common conceptions*⁸. Second, Bernard assumes a transitive use of προαπολείπειν ("vorher hinter sich läßt"), whereas in the overwhelming majority of cases, Plutarch uses the verb in an intransitive way⁹. As a matter of fact, there are only two instances in the entire *Corpus Plutarcheum* where προαπολείπειν is apparently used transitively. Both occur in the same section of *On moral virtue* and since neither of them is unproblematic¹⁰, it is safe to say that an intransitive sense would be more in line with the Plutarchan style. In this respect, the translations grouped together under the second alternative prove superior.

Apart from these two minor quibbles, Bernard's overall interpretation of the meaning of this passage raises some further questions. He understands the phrase against the background of an opposition between divine and human knowledge. Human beings, on the one hand, need to go from τὰ γιγνόμενα to τὰ ὄντα in order to reach true knowledge. God, on the other hand, knows being directly and thus need not follow such a course¹¹. This general explanation makes perfect sense from a Platonic perspective, but it does not do away with all interpretative difficulties. For this particular passage simply does not deal with a contrast between human and divine knowledge, and even in the broader context Plutarch never discusses the importance of τὰ γιγνόμενα for human knowledge. The sentence

⁷ Bernard 1990, p. 206: "daß <Gott> in der Erkenntnis das Werden nicht vorher hinter sich läßt".

⁸ *De comm. not.* 1078F: ἀνίσων γὰρ νοουμένων, τὸ μὲν προαπολείπεται τοῖς ἐσχάτοις μέρεσι τὸ δὲ παραλλάττει καὶ περίεστι, which is translated by Cherniss (LCL) as "when things are conceived as unequal, it is by the ultimate parts that the one leaves off before the other and the other passes it by and is in excess of it".

⁹ *De ad. et am.* 74E; *De sera num.* 558C; *An seni* 787B, 789D and 797D; *De facie* 937A; *De comm. not.* 1078F and 1080A.

¹⁰ The phrase προενδίδωσιν ἢ ὁρμή καὶ προαπολείπει τὸ καλόν in *De virt. mor.* 444C is ambivalent and may be understood either way. Most interpretations assume a transitive use here (e.g. Babbitt [LCL] *ad loc.*: "the impulsion yields too soon and prematurely forsakes the good; similarly Babut 1969, p. 100: "l'impulsion se relâche prématurément et reste en deçà du bien" and Becchi 1990, p. 91: "l'impulso si rilassa e cede prima di raggiungere il bene"), but an intransitive interpretation is perfectly possible as well: "the impulsion yields too soon and the good prematurely takes its leave". The second occurrence is less ambivalent: ὑπερβάλλοντες τὸ μέτριον ἢ προαπολείποντες (444B). I grant that the most natural interpretation here would probably assume that τὸ μέτριον is the object of both verbs, although I am not sure whether this is the only possible interpretation, or even the correct one. To my mind, it cannot be excluded that even here, the verb is used intransitively, as everywhere else in Plutarch's works, but even apart from this, a note of caution is in place here, since a couple of manuscripts appear to read ἀπολείποντες instead of προαπολείποντες.

¹¹ Bernard 1990, p. 206: "Der Mensch muß gemäß platonischer Auffassung die Stufe der Erkenntnis des Werdenden erst übersteigen, um zur Erkenntnis des Seienden zu gelangen. Gott hingegen hat in seiner Erkenntnis keinen solchen Weg zurückzulegen, da er das Seiende unmittelbar erkennt. In diesem Sinne ist nur Gott zu echter Erkenntnis fähig, wie Plutarch vorher gesagt hat".

rather concerns divine eternal happiness and the significance of a particular kind of knowledge for this happiness.

It is time now to turn to the sentence as a whole. I first propose a literal translation, which keep as close to the Greek as possible and tries to do justice to the dative *τῇ γνώσει*, to the intransitive use of *προαπολείπειν*, to the significance of the particle *δέ* and to the Platonic distinction between *τὰ γιγνόμενα* and *τὰ ὄντα*:

In my opinion, the happiness of even the eternal life, which God has obtained as his portion, consists in the fact that the things that come to be do not, through knowledge, fail in advance. But if one takes away knowledge of what exists and thinking, immortality would not be life but a mere passage of time.

If this literal translation of the passage indeed succeeds in solving the above mentioned problems, it is bought at a high cost. I voluntarily agree that it is quite abstruse and is unlikely to be readily understood. When I still stick to it for the time being, it is because I first want to keep very close to the Greek text, which is far from useless in view of all the interpretative problems mentioned above. Moreover, it may help to see how tantalisingly obscure Plutarch's own phrasing actually is. We may presume that Clea, the dedicatee of the treatise, or any other ancient reader, may have paused here for a moment to ponder on the precise meaning of the sentence.

It is clear, then, that this literal translation is in need of some further comment, unless we would fall into the trap of explaining *obscurum per obscurius*. Let us thus try to further clarify the sense of this complex argument. As argued above, the connective particle *δέ* links two different moves in the argument. The second step is the clearest one: thanks to God's knowledge of what really is (*τὰ ὄντα*), his immortality surpasses the mere lapse of time and becomes true living. This is the intelligible level. God is more than simply *τὸ ἄφθαρτον*: he is a conscious living being who knows what is. But if we turn to God's happiness, yet another component comes into play, and this is introduced in the tantalising phrase *τὸ τῇ γνώσει μὴ προαπολείπειν τὰ γιγνόμενα*. It is *through his knowledge* (causal dative) that God does not leave *τὰ γιγνόμενα* beforehand, or intransitively, that these *γιγνόμενα* do not fail in advance. To my mind the prefix *προ-* is an important key for a correct understanding of what this precisely means¹². It obviously denotes that something happens "before" something else. But what happens before what? From a general Platonic point of view, we could expect that the intelligible realm *a priori* excludes any attention to the phenomena. That would mean that these phenomena are left behind "before" one turns to the intelligible world, or, in other terms, that the *γιγνόμενα* fail "before" one reaches the level of knowledge (*γνώσις*). What we get in this passage is exactly the opposite. Plutarch is thinking of a

¹² One of the referees perceptibly warns against overinterpreting the prefix *προ-*, as it may, after all, only reflect a tendency that we often find in Plutarch, that is, the fondness for an accumulation of prefixes. This *caveat* makes sense indeed, yet to my mind, we should prefer, if possible, an interpretation that can do justice to the full (philosophical) relevance of the prefix *προ-*.

kind of knowledge through which these *γινόμενα* are not *a priori* left behind. God's knowledge is such that it is not exclusively concerned with the intelligible but also shows a certain openness for concrete events. This is basically in line with a passage from *On the decline of oracles*, where Plutarch argues that Zeus is not merely focusing on himself alone¹³.

But if this holds true, we risk to fall from Scylla into Charybdis. For we indeed immediately touch upon another philosophical conundrum that was already mentioned above. Is human freedom not directly menaced by this divine knowledge of *τὰ γινόμενα*? Not necessarily. Plutarch nowhere says that he is thinking of *prescience*. The opposite is rather true: the fact that *τὰ γινόμενα* are not *a priori* excluded, may well suggest that God *only comes to know them at the very moment that they come to be*. This implies a quite dynamic conception of God. His knowledge has nothing static, is not limited to real being, to what a Platonist would call *ὄντως ὄν*, but takes into account contingent events too. Now Plutarch does not go so far as to conclude that this knowledge of particular contingencies also affects God's essence¹⁴, yet he does argue in this striking passage that it is at least partly constitutive of his eternal blessedness, and even that is quite a radical and remarkable conclusion for a Platonist. I would regard this position as the crystalization of the ultimate consequence of Plutarch's providential thinking of God. For Plutarch's God is a lover of mankind (*φιλόανθρωπος*)¹⁵ who derives pleasure from the mere act of being gracious and doing good (*Friends and Flatterers* 63F). To the extent, then, that God's providence contributes to his happiness and that his knowledge of *τὰ γινόμενα* is a necessary condition for his providential working¹⁶, we may indeed conclude that this knowledge directly contributes to God's eternal blessedness.

If all this is true, it is clear that this passage at the outset of *Isis and Osiris* raises problems that have to do with the very core of Plutarch's philosophical and theological convictions. It also illustrates important and recurrent characteristics of Plutarch's thinking about God. We saw that he here develops a particularly high-minded and dynamic conception of God that can be reconciled with his fundamental outlook as a Platonist philosopher. And we may finally add that the passage also allows us a glimpse into the heart of Plutarch, the priest of Apollo. After all, if there was one place on earth where it became tangibly clear what it meant that *τὰ γινόμενα* need not *προαπολείπειν* because of God's knowledge, it was certainly Delphi.

Works quoted

¹³ *De def. or.* 426D: οὐδ' ἑαυτὸν ἄλλο δ' οὐδέν, ὡς ᾠήθησαν ἔνιοι, νοῶν; the polemical reference is to Aristotle; cf. the excellent discussion of Ferrari 1999.

¹⁴ For Plutarch, God is fundamentally *ἀπαθής*; see, e.g., *De def. or.* 419A; cf. *De prof. in virt.* 83E.

¹⁵ See, e.g., *De Pyth. or.* 402A; *De genio Socr.* 593A; *Amatorius* 758A; *Ad princ. iner.* 781A; *De Stoic. rep.* 1051E and 1052B.

¹⁶ For Plutarch's nuanced view on the influence of divine providence in the course of historical events, see esp. Swain 1989 and Frazier - Leão 2010.

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